Outlasting the Caliphate: The Evolution of the Islamic State Threat in Africa

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The *annus horribilis* Islamic State Central suffered in 2019, during which the group lost the last stretch of its "territorial caliphate" in Iraq and Syria and its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was killed, does not appear to have had a discernible impact on the overall operational trajectory of the Islamic State threat in Africa. Post-2019, the Islamic State's West Africa Province sustained around the same high level of violence while Islamic State provinces in Libya, Sinai, and Somalia remained pernicious, though generally contained, threats. In some parts of Africa, the group grew as a threat. Both wings of the Islamic State's new Central Africa Province as well as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara wing of the Islamic State's West Africa Province escalated their violent campaigns post-2019. The Islamic State's province in Algeria remains effectively defunct, and though the Islamic State affiliate in Tunisia failed to conduct major attacks, it remained active. As the authors stress in this article and an upcoming book, the overall resilience of the Islamic State in Africa should not be a surprise; it underscores that while connections were built up between Islamic State Central and its African affiliates—with the former providing, at times, some degree of strategic direction, coordination, and material assistance—the latter have historically evolved under their own steam and acted with a significant degree of autonomy.

Beginning in 2014, individual jihadis and groups of jihadis around the African continent have pledged allegiance to Islamic State Central. By the end of 2014, the Islamic State had already declared five official provinces—or *wilayat*—in Africa: three in Libya and one each in Algeria and the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt. By the end of 2015, it had added one more in the Lake Chad Basin, where the group previously known as Boko Haram became the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP). By mid-2018, the Islamic State had begun to consistently describe militants in Somalia as members of a new Islamic State province, and by early 2019, it had declared yet another province in Africa, the Islamic State's Central Africa Province (ISCAP), which had "wings"[a] in both the Democratic Republic of Congo and Mozambique. Throughout this time, other sympathetic and robust cells—which would never themselves be elevated to "province" status like those mentioned above—would emerge around the continent as well, most notably in its "Greater Sahara" branch (which would eventually become a part of ISWAP), and the "soldiers of the caliphate" in Tunisia. Elsewhere in places such as Morocco and Kenya, and other countries, individuals inspired by Islamic State Central would undertake violence in its name.

Yet even as the Islamic State's presence grew throughout the African continent between 2014 and 2019, well before the end of this period, its central command's positions in Iraq and Syria began to deteriorate. In March 2019, Islamic State Central lost the last remaining territory of its Middle Eastern caliphate, in Baghouz, Syria. Islamic State Central's misfortunes worsened when its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was killed by U.S. special forces in northwestern Syria in October 2019. Given that this one-two punch significantly weakened Islamic State Central both practically and reputationally, it would not have been surprising if these developments had been accompanied by a decline in enthusiasm among the Islamic State's African provinces and non-province affiliates for the Islamic State enterprise, and also a decreased operational tempo. But Islamic State Central's misfortunes did little to lessen, at least outwardly, its African provinces' and non-province affiliates' commitment to its

a Jacob Zenn introduced this terminology in his review of the Islamic state's activities in Africa in May 2020. Jacob Zenn, "ISIS in Africa: The Caliphate's Next Frontier," Center for Global Policy, May 26, 2020.

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Islamic State media release showing Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) fighters pledging allegiance to new Islamic State leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi following the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, published November 7, 2019.

project. By November 15, 2019, almost every African Islamic State province and non-province affiliate except for Algeria[b] had quickly pledged allegiance[c] to the Islamic State's new leader, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, who the U.S. government has identified as Amir Muhammad Sa'id 'Abd-al-Rahman al-Mawla.[1]

This article examines how Islamic State Central's *annus horribilis* of 2019, which cemented its decline, impacted—or not—the activities and overall strength of its African provinces and non-province affiliates. In the main, the authors show how and why Islamic State Central's 2019 decline had seemingly little impact on the threat trajectory of its African provinces and non-province affiliates.[d] As the authors argue in a soon-to-be-published book,[2] the Islamic State's African provinces have always acted with substantial degrees of autonomy from Islamic State Central, and thus, their parent group's decline did little to alter their trajectories. Indeed, post-2019, the Islamic State's West Africa Province remained deadly as ever while its provinces in Libya, Sinai, and Somalia continued their pre-2019 trajectories as pernicious, though generally contained, threats. Notably, the Islamic State's Central Africa Province and the Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) group (which would be subsumed into the West Africa Province), increased their violence post-2019. Elsewhere, Islamic State provinces (like Algeria) and non-province affiliates, which had historically been quiet, suffered no discernible declines.

Before discussing the overall "state of the Islamic State" in Africa as 2020 comes to a close, this article provides brief histories of the evolution of each of the six official Islamic State provinces in Africa as well as the largest non-province Islamic State affiliate group in Africa, in Tunisia. In each case, the authors assess the impact (or lack thereof) of Islamic State Central's 2019 *annus horribilis*. The authors drew on a wide variety of sources, including open-source reporting in various international media, interviews with observers on the ground, and analysis of open-source propaganda by the groups themselves.

Libyan Provinces

Once the exemplar of success of Islamic State Central's extra-Middle Eastern provinces between late 2014 and late 2016, the Islamic State's presence in Libya has since declined precipitously, though it

b Conspicuous in its absence was the Islamic State's Algeria Province, which did not, to the authors' knowledge, re-pledge.

c To that end, the Islamic State's Sinai Province was first (November 2, 2019), followed by re-pledges from its Somalia Province (November 3, 2019), members of "Jund al-Khilafa" in Tunisia (November 6, 2019), its West Africa Province and Central Africa Province (November 7, 2019), members of the Islamic State in Greater Sahara (now known as the ISWAP in Mali and Burkina Faso) (November 9, 2019), followed—after a lag—by the Libya Province (November 15, 2019). For Sinai, see Oded Berkowitz, "#Egypt-Wilayat #Sinai became the first Wilaya to pledge allegiance to …," Twitter, November 3, 2019. For Somalia, see FJ, "NEW: ISIS militants in Somalia pledge allegiance to new ISIS emir," Twitter, November 3, 2019. For Tunisia, see Mick, "#ISIS fighters #Tunisia pledge alliance to the new caliph …," Twitter, November 6, 2019. For ISWAP, see Laith Alkhouri, "More: Pledge of allegiance from #ISIS branch in #WestAfrica …," Twitter, November 7, 2019. For ISCAP, see Robert Postings, "ISIS's Al Naba magazine featured pictures of pledges of allegiance …," Twitter, November 7, 2019. For ISGS, see Mick, "#ISWA #ISIS fighters in #Mali and #BurkinaFaso pledge allegiance to the new Caliph," Twitter, November 9, 2019. For Libya, see Oded Berkowitz, "#Libya- nearly 3 weeks after al-Baghdadi was killed & almost 2 week after the start …," Twitter, November 15, 2019.

d The Islamic State's own attack metrics for Africa also support this conclusion. See Figure 6 in Tomasz Rolbiecki, Pieter Van Ostaeyen, and Charlie Winter, "The Islamic State's Strategic Trajectory in Africa: Key Takeaways from its Attack Claims," *CTC Sentinel* 13:8 (2020).

looks to be on a slight upward trajectory since al-Baghdadi's death in October 2019. After the fall of Qaddafi in 2011, thousands of Libyans began traveling to participate alongside the anti-Assad rebels in Syria as early as late 2011,[3] where rather than affiliating with the primary al-Qa`ida presence there, Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN), they formed their own distinct fighting force, the Katibat al-Battar al-Libi, or the Battar Brigade.[4] This force would ultimately align with the Islamic State when the Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic State split occurred in April 2013.[5] Eventually, many of these Islamic State-aligned fighters returned to Libya—some with battle fatigue[6] but others remaining under the direction of the subsequently formed Islamic State Central[7]—and in Derna, merged with members of the pre-existing jihadi group Ansar al-Sharia (Libya)[8] to form a new group, the Islamic Youth Shura Council (or Majlis Shura Shabab al-Islam, or MSSI).[9]

The MSSI began to offer statements of support to the Islamic State—even before it had been fully announced—in June 2014, and pledged *bay `a* by November of that year.[10] By the end of 2014, three Islamic State provinces had arisen in Libya—Cyrenaica, Fezzan, and Tripolitania—with Libya-based Islamic State soldiers (mostly local but many foreign) occupying entire portions of the major Libyan towns of Derna (late 2014 to mid-2015) and Sirte (February 2015 to December 2016).[11] Between late 2015 and late 2016, the Islamic State in Libya was consistently estimated to have between 2,000 and 6,500 fighters[12] with estimates varying widely within that range. In these efforts, its members undertook widespread governance efforts of varying efficacy, many of which were marked by brutal human rights abuses for citizens who resisted its rule.[13] Despite these occupations, the Islamic State was driven from its major territorial when targeted by a joint U.S.-Libyan militia offensive that ended in December 2016.

From December 2016 until al-Baghdadi's death in October 2019, the Islamic State in Libya was sporadically active, despite being profoundly weakened from its 2014-2016 apogee. By the end of 2016, most surviving Islamic State members had fled to Libya's more remote, southern Fezzan desert, though the group only occasionally launched larger-scale attacks in cities, including a May 2018 attack on the High National Elections Commission of Libya in Tripoli in which at least 12 were killed by dual suicide bombers[14] and a September 2018 operation in which Islamic State militants attacked the National Oil Corporation in Tripoli, killing two and injuring 10.[15] The Islamic State's most active month during 2019 was April, when it conducted, according to tracking by Aaron Zelin, at least 11 attacks, in Sabha, Tmassah, al-Fuqaha, Ghadduwah, Zillah, Darnah, Samnu, Haruj, "and Checkpoint 400 between Sabha and Jufrah."[16] In May 2019, members of the Islamic State in Libya allied with Chadian fighters to attack a Haftar-LNA training base in Sebha, killing eight,[17] and launched another two attacks in Derna in June 2019, which injured 18.[18] In response, in September 2019, the United States launched four airstrikes[19] against Islamic State militants in southern Libya[e] (killing an estimated 43 militants, or one-third, of all of the Islamic State's Libyan fighters).[20]

Media production by the Islamic State in Libya also declined after 2016. According to Zelin, Libyan Islamic State groups produced only four videos between 2017 and 2019,[f] despite the various provinces having produced nearly 50 media products between 2015 and 2016.[21]

However, the disastrous decline-cementing 2019 for Islamic State Central does not appear to have further weakened the Islamic State in Libya. The group's Libyan Province is essentially as strong/weak as it was at the end of 2018. With only an estimated 100 to 200 fighters in southern Libya according to a U.N. report published in January 2020,[22] and with the one-time emir of its Barqah province, Malik al-Khazmi, believed to have been killed in 2019,[23] the Islamic State in Libya still retains its bases in the southern deserts (its former "Fezzan province")[24] as well as assumed sleeper cells in neighborhoods in Sirte.[25] King Abdullah of Jordan, in a warning on the Islamic State threat, stated in January 2020 that "several thousand fighters have left Idlib (Syria) through the northern border and have ended up in Libya,"[26] an assessment that was seconded by Russia's foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov.[27] Indeed, the United Nations' ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee listed the Islamic State in Libya on March 4, 2020.[28] And, as the United Nations notes, the Islamic State in Libya's reduced number of fighters may have the upside for the group of making it less "financially burdened;" as an anecdotal corollary, U.N. member states also offered evidence of the group's members buying weapons on the black market and investing in "projects" in coastal areas of the country.[29] As of September 2020, small cells still exist mostly in some cities, though mostly in the southern desert: a U.N. report published in early 2020 estimated only between 100 to 200 Islamic State fighters remained in southern Libya.[30] In sum, though the Islamic State in Libya has been profoundly degraded from its 2014 to 2016 heyday—given it has potentially been bolstered by a new injection of the fighting in Syria and given it can still take advantage of the chaos of the enduring civil war in the country—the Islamic State in Libya remains a moderate threat.

Algerian Province

The Islamic State's province in Algeria, one of its earliest in Africa, emerged soon after the announcement of the caliphate but was effectively destroyed long before Islamic State Central's tumultuous decline-cementing 2019. In a July 2014 audiotape,[31] an al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) unit of several dozen fighters calling itself Jund al-Khilafah, or "Soldiers of the Caliphate," and led by Abdelmalik Gouri,[g] pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi. They then repeated the pledge in a September 2014 video[32] that included

e According to reporting from *The New York Times*, a presumed target of some of the strikes was Malik Khazmi, a facilitator and recruiter for the group hailing from Bani Walid. Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Drone Strikes Stymie ISIS in Southern Libya," *New York Times*, November 18, 2019.

f According to Aaron Zelin, these four video messages were released in September 2017, July 2018, July 2019, and December 2019. Aaron Zelin, "The Islamic State in Libya Has Yet to Recover," Washington Institute, December 6, 2019.

g Abdelmalek Gouri had joined the AQIM's predecessor organization, the GSPC, and rose through the ranks to become the deputy of Abdelmalik Droukdel, who was recently killed by the French military in a targeted operation in Mali. Gouri's "battalion," Katibat al-Huddah, used the name "Jund al-Khilafah" when it pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. Ignacio Cembrero, "Jurar lealtad al califa del terror," *Mundo*, October 2, 2014; Benjamin Roger and Farid Alilat, "How AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel was killed in Mali," Africa Report, June 8, 2020; Andrew Lebovich, "Soldiers of the Caliphate in the Land of Algeria: A New Organization Declares itself and Pledges Allegiance to Baghdadi," Islamist Movements, September 16, 2014.

the group's videotaped beheading of a kidnapped French hiking instructor, Hervé Gourdel,[33] leading to a harsh crackdown by Algerian security forces. Islamic State Central officially recognized Gouri's group as "Wilayat Jazair," or its "Algerian Province," in November 2014.[34] Despite that recognition, the Algerian crackdown killed Gouri in December 2014,[35] and in May 2015, his successor, Abdallah Othman al-Asimi, was also killed along with most of the group's fighters and commanders.[36] Disparate AQIM units in Algeria subsequently pledged to the Islamic State[h] but likewise were dismantled by Algerian security forces in relatively quick succession. So unable was the group to overcome the crackdown by security forces that the most recent attack claimed by the Islamic State in northern Algeria was an August 31, 2017, suicide bombing in Tiaret.[37] Further, to the authors' knowledge, there has not been a serious incident involving Islamic State-affiliated militants in northern Algeria since an ambush by Algerian National Police on an individual purportedly affiliated with the Islamic State in February 2018.[38]

In the post al-Baghdadi era, there were Islamic State media claims of a November 2019 clash[39] and February 2020 suicide bombing[40] near the border with Mali under the "Wilayat Jazair" name. However, rather than attacks carried out by a newly regrouped Islamic State Algeria province, these claimed attacks appear to be opportunistic labelings—intended to help feign the group's capacity—of activity by cells affiliated with ISGS, to the south,[i] rather than a resurrection of the Islamic State-affiliated insurgency begun by Gouri in northern Algeria in 2014. While militant activity and security force actions have continued in northern Algeria—meaning that a future resurgence of Islamic State-affiliated militancy is not impossible—Wilayat Jazair as an organized entity in northern Algeria appears to remain defunct.

Sinai Province

The Islamic State formally announced its presence in Egypt when the North Sinai-based and al-Qa`ida-aligned Ansar Beit al-Maqdis Islamist extremist movement pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on November 10, 2014,[41] thus becoming the Islamic State's "Wilayat Sinai." Within 12 months of its inception, the group marked its preeminence in Egypt's jihadi landscape by claiming to have downed the Russian-operated Metrojet Flight 9268 as it departed the Red Sea resort town of Sharm el-Sheikh on October 31, 2015.[42] Simultaneously, Wilayat Sinai also aimed to seize and govern territory. To that end, more than 100 of the group's fighters attempted to seize the Sinai town of Sheikh Zuweid on July 1, 2015.[43] Although this attempted occupation of Sheikh Zuweid lasted less than 24 hours—with an Egyptian air and ground offensive neutralizing most militants who occupied the town[44]—the attack highlighted both the intent and operational capacity of Wilayat Sinai. This threat was further highlighted in December 2017 when Egyptian Interior Minister Magdy Abdel-Ghaffar narrowly escaped a brazen assassination attempt by Wilayat Sinai at al-Arish airport.[45] The attack came a month after the militant group killed in excess of 300 worshippers at the al-Rawda mosque in the town of Bir al-Abed in Egypt's North Sinai Governorate, which was predominantly frequented by members of the Sufi-dominated and pro-government Sawarka tribe.[46]

Despite the often-spectacular acts of violence by Wilayat Sinai—which also extended to Egypt's Nile Delta and Western Desert regions [47]—the group's operational capacity was significantly downgraded by the time of al-Baghdadi's death in October 2019, largely due to the broad-based counterterrorism campaign against the group by the Egyptian state, dubbed Comprehensive Operation–Sinai 2018.[48] Since its initiation in February 2018, the initiative has resulted in the deaths of hundreds of Wilayat Sinai militants, in addition to dismantling some of the group's logistical networks and preventing it from controlling territory.[49] Despite its successes, however, Comprehensive Operation–Sinai 2018 has failed in its mandate of completely defeating Wilayat Sinai, and the campaign has also been widely criticized for human right abuses.[50]

In 2020, Wilayat Sinai continued to wage a low-level insurgency in the North Sinai governorate as highlighted by a series of attacks against Egyptian military positions and pro-government tribesmen across the region since June 1, 2020.[51] The severe setbacks suffered by Islamic State Central do not appear to have had a discernible impact on the trajectory of the Islamic State in the Sinai region. Indeed, according to analysis in this publication of the Islamic State's attack claims in Africa, Wilayat Sinai was only second to ISWAP in terms of the total number of acts of violence committed over the course of 2019.[52] Moreover, violence by Wilayat Sinai made Egypt the country with the most Islamic State-reported attacks during that year. In the summer of 2020, the Islamic State's Egyptian affiliate captured at least four rural settlements near the town of Bir al-Abd.[53]

West Africa Province

The Islamic State's West Africa province, or Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiyya, comprises two groups that operate independently in the Lake Chad basin and Liptako-Gourma regions of West Africa. For the purposes of clarity, the authors will refer to the Lake Chad Basin-based movement as the Islamic State West Africa Province Core (ISWAP Core) and the Islamic State in Greater Sahara when speaking of its Liptako-Gourma-based counterpart.

ISWAP Core

Since its emergence in March 2015, ISWAP has been the Islamic State's largest, most deadly, and most governance-capable province on the African continent, a trend that continued after the death of al-Baghdadi. When Jama'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihad (colloquially known as "Boko Haram") leader Abubakar Shekau pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on March 7, 2015[54]—and Islamic State Central accepted the pledge six days later,[55] elevating the group to official provincial status—it marked the formal

h Former AQIM units that pledged allegiance to the Islamic State included an unnamed unit in Skikda in May 2015, Ghuraba Brigade in July 2015, Ansar Brigade in September 2015, Humat al-Da'wah al-Salafiyah in September 2015, and Katibat al-Fateh in May 2017. Nathaniel Barr, "If at First You Don't Succeed, Try Deception: The Islamic State's Expansion Efforts in Algeria," *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor*, November 13, 2015; Djallil Lounnas, "Jihadist Groups in North Africa and the Sahel, Between Disintegration, Reconfiguration and Resilience," *Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture*, *Working Papers No. 16,* October 2018, p. 6.

i The November 2019 clash resulted in the death of Aboubacar Ould Abidine (aka Abu Zoubeir), a lieutenant in the ISGS subunit Katibat Salaheddine. Héni Nsaibia, "#Algeria-#BREAKING: Aboubacar Ould Abidine (aka Abu Zoubeir), cousin …," Twitter, November 21, 2019.

affiliation[j] between two of the world's deadliest extremist organizations.[56]

While in the years that followed counterterrorism pressure bore down on the newly branded "Islamic State West Africa Province" (ISWAP Core), internal ideological divisions to an equal degree threatened the group. Notably, it was announced in the August 2, 2016, edition of the Islamic State's Al Naba publication[57] that ISWAP Core had replaced Shekau with a new *wali,* or governor, identified as Abu Musab al-Barnawi, the son of slain Boko Haram founding leader, Muhammed Yusuf.[58] In a series of audio tapes and documents subsequently released by al-Barnawi, it was disclosed that Shekau had been expelled from ISWAP Core due to his disobedience in regard to the edicts of al-Baghdadi—specifically, his continued use of female suicide bombers and excommunication of his internal critics, his alleged embezzlement of ISWAP Core resources, and (from Islamic State Central's point of view) his overly broad *takfiri* interpretations justifying violence against Muslim civilians.[59]

Following the August 2016 fracturing of ISWAP Core between al-Barnawi and Shekau loyalists,[60] each faction has pursued its insurgency in the Lake Chad Basin via unique methodologies.[k] For ISWAP, the group pursued the Islamic State's directives by projecting a self-image of its engagement with civilians through proselytizing and outreach activities,[61] and by focusing its violence against hardened military targets (as highlighted by the group's overrunning of more than 20 military bases in northeastern Nigeria between 2018 and 2019[62]) rather than civilians as had been the case broadly under Shekau's tenure.

While outwardly it may appear that since 2017 ISWAP Core has been adopting the ideological and political framework promulgated by Islamic State Central, internally, the reality has seen ISWAP in a state of ideological flux. On August 21, 2018, ISWAP Core experienced a mutiny that led to the death of a key commander, Mamaan Nur,[63] and the replacement of al-Barnawi as leader[64] with Abu Abdulla Idris[65] (commonly referred to as "Ba Idrissa"). While ISWAP Core did not reveal the reason for these two developments, Nigerian government reports assessed that the group's rank-and-file had grown frustrated with al-Barnawi and Nur's 'moderate' ideological leadership.[66] Indeed, although it repledged allegiance to the Islamic State's new overall leader, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Quarayshi, on November 8, 2019, ISWAP Core appears to be veering away from the Islamic State's ideological framework. Under the leadership of Ba Idrissa,[67] ISWAP Core has continued its acts of violence against civilians, counter to Islamic State Central's requests,[68] as highlighted when suspected ISWAP Core combatants massacred as many as 81 villagers in the town of Gubio on June 9, 2020.[69] This act of violence, largely indistinguishable from the *modus operandi* of the Islamic State Central-disavowed Shekau faction, highlights the possibility that, as of June 2020, more extreme members of ISWAP Core may be gaining the ascendency over their moderate counterparts within the movement.

Despite these ideological divisions, the frequency of ISWAP's Core's violence have been largely unaffected by al-Baghdadi's death. This was reflected in recent analysis featured in this publication, which assessed violence committed by Islamic State-affiliated groups on the African continent. As per the cited analysis, ISWAP Core claimed some 177 attacks in 2019, which were distributed quite evenly across the year.[70]

The decline-cementing calamities suffered by Islamic State Central in 2019 do not therefore appear to have affected the trajectory of the Islamic State jihad in northeastern Nigeria and the Lake Chad region. The group's ability to maintain (and indeed, increase, if its claims are taken at face value) its operational tempo, combined with a newfound willingness to include civilians in its target profile, could see the worsening of what is already a catastrophic humanitarian crisis in northeastern Nigeria and the wider Lake Chad region.

The Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS)

Though never its own official stand-alone *wilaya*, the group known colloquially as the Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) has progressed from a recognized though unofficial (and generally ignored) Islamic State affiliate for much of its existence, to an increasingly important and—as of March 2019—distinct "wing" of the Islamic State's West Africa Province.

The first seeds of what would become the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara were planted during the holy month of Ramadan in the summer of 2014, when Hamada Ould al-Khairy—a senior Mauritanian commander of the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (more commonly known by its French acronym "MUJAO")[l]—penned a letter in support of the Islamic State's then-proclaimed proto-state.[71] Almost a year later on May 13, 2015, Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui, also previously a MUJAO leader from Western Sahara, issued an audio statement in which he pledged *bay`a* to the Islamic State. In doing so, he splintered away from the al-Qa`ida-affiliated al-Mourabitoun, to which he belonged at the time, and subsequently, along with a few dozen of defected fighters, formed ISGS. It would not be until the fall of 2016 that his men—as part of the new outfit—would conduct their first series of armed attacks, which included assaults on a customs station in Markoye,[72] and an army camp in Intangom,[73] both in Burkina Faso, as well as an external attempted prison break against the high-security prison of Koutoukale north of Niger's capital Niamey.[74] Despite initially ignoring the pledges from al-Sahraoui's group, these late 2016 armed assaults led to recognition from Islamic State Central. A video released by the Islamic State media agency Amaq on October 30, 2016, showed al-Sahraoui and his men pledging allegiance to al-Baghdadi, but despite acknowledgment of its presence from Islamic State Central, ISGS was not elevated to the status of *wilaya*.

j At its core, "Boko Haram" seems to have pledged allegiance to mitigate the troubles it faced as its own fortunes were in decline. Indeed, the 'Islamic' region (*dawla*) that Shekau had declared prior to the pledge in northeastern Nigeria on August 24, 2014, was, at the time of the pledge, being dismantled by the Nigerian military and those of neighboring Cameroon, Chad, and Niger, to which the Boko Haram contagion had also spread. Jacob Zenn, "Making Sense of Boko Haram's Different Factions: Who, How and Why?" *African Arguments*, September 20, 2016; Dionne Searcey and Marc Santora, "Boko Haram Attacks Persist, but Nigerian Officials Say Group Is Losing Ground," *New York Times*, November 15, 2015; Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "Boko Haram Did Not Declare A Caliphate," Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, September 4, 2014.

k For its part, Shekau's faction continued the employment of suicide bombers and enacting violence against civilian communities. Omar Mahmood and Ndubuisi Ani, *Factional Dynamics within Boko Haram* (Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, 2018), p. 11.

l MUJAO emerged as a local splinter from al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2011 with a vision to spread jihad across West Africa. The core were Sahelian Arabs from Western Sahara, Mali, and Mauritania who came to prominence in 2012 when jihadi groups seized territory in northern Mali.

Screen capture showing the launch of an attack against a Nigerien army base on December 10, 2019, in the town of In-Ates, featured in the first official, full-length, high-quality video by the Islamic State dedicated to ISGS, entitled "Then It Will Be for Them A [Source Of] Regret," released on January 10, 2020.

From being a small group—greatly underestimated and relatively shrouded in secrecy compared to its al-Qa`ida-aligned counterparts in the Sahel—there was a discernible change in ISGS's capabilities in 2017. In that year, the group grew as it managed to mobilize a large number of fighters against the backdrop of intercommunal violence in the Mali-Niger borderlands,[75] and also received militants defecting from its Sahelian al-Qa`ida-affiliated counterpart, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), a Sahelian jihadi conglomerate that served as a uniting umbrella group for five other factions.[76 m] Operationally, ISGS went from undertaking small hit-and-run attacks to much larger-scale,[77] coordinated attacks against military outposts across Niger's northern Tillaberi region, including a particularly deadly ambush in Tirzawane in February 2017 that killed 16 soldiers,[78] spurring Nigerien authorities to request the deployment of French troops.[79] An ISGS ambush in the village of Tongo Tongo, Niger, in October 2017 targeting a joint U.S.-Nigerien force—which killed four U.S. Green Berets and five Nigerien counterparts—served to definitively thrust ISGS from relative regional obscurity to the headlines.[80]

Even though ISGS until 2019 remained publicly disconnected from the Islamic State network—with Islamic State Central not releasing any messages in regard to the group beyond recognizing its existence back in October 2016,[n] and the group never being elevated to the status of a full standalone province—ISGS's fidelity to its parent organization did not erode. Rather, it increasingly portrayed itself as a hardcore alternative to its local al-Qa`ida counterpart by carrying out mass atrocities against civilian populations and showing beheadings and other brutal violence in its self-produced media products.[81] On March 22, 2019, the two-and-a-half-years-long silence by Islamic State Central regarding its Sahelian affiliate ended when Islamic State Central published a single-photo report about it labeled as pertaining to the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), showcasing Islamic State fighters in Burkina Faso,[82] and serving as a first sign that ISGS was on its way to becoming incorporated into ISWAP. This photo report was followed by a two-page report dedicated to the "Greater Sahara" in the 175th edition of the Al Naba newsletter in which Islamic State Central claimed responsibility for a number of attacks,[83] most notably two suicide attacks against French forces in Mali[84] and the abduction and subsequent murder of Canadian geologist Kirk Woodman in Burkina Faso.[85] In late April 2019, al-Baghdadi made a rare audio-visual appearance, accepting pledges of fealty emanating from Mali and Burkina Faso. He also took the opportunity to credit ISGS founder Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui as a subregional interlocutor, by explicitly mentioning and praising him, and called on Sahelian militants to

m JNIM is composed of al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb's Sahara Emirate, Ansar Dine, Katiba Macina, al-Mourabitoun, and a majority of the Burkinabe militant group Ansarul Islam.

n During this approximate two-and-a-half years hiatus between October 2016 and March 2019 in official Islamic State media releases related to its Sahelian affiliate, ISGS was only mentioned as news items in the terrorist organization's weekly Al Naba newsletter.

intensify operations against France and its allies in the region.[86] ISGS militants heeded Baghdadi's call. In May 2019, they launched a string of attacks across Tillaberi, including a complex mass-casualty ambush not far from Tongo Tongo.[87]

If previous years had seen step-changes in ISGS growth and capabilities, the second half of 2019 witnessed a quantum leap in the frequency[88] and lethality[89] of the group's activities, with ISGS becoming a sort of flagship affiliate of the Islamic State, even if it was technically a subgroup within ISWAP. This was evidenced by the large increase in attention designated to ISGS in the Islamic State's media productions including lengthy coverage in the Al Naba bulletin and videos by Amaq Agency and the ISWAP media office.[90] For instance, Al Naba dedicated nine out of 20 of its front pages to ISGS between November 2019 and March 2020.[91] In August 2019, ISGS and JNIM simultaneously launched a militant campaign in the tri-state border area between Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.[92] During the offensive, ISGS pulled off several of the deadliest attacks ever recorded in these countries to date, overrunning half a dozen military outposts, leaving nearly 300 government troops dead,[o] and prompting France to designate the group as the "the number one enemy in the Sahel,"[93] an announcement that largely neglected the likely longer-term threat posed by JNIM.

The series of misfortunes suffered by the Islamic State in 2019 culminating in al-Baghdadi's demise in 2019 did little to diminish ISGS enthusiasm. To the contrary, its operations remained robust. In February 2020, in order to counter the advance of jihadi groups in the borderlands between central Mali, northern Burkina Faso, and western Niger, France announced the deployment of 600 supplemental troops, underlining the threat that ISGS had become.[94] Subsequently, in March 2020, France announced the launch of operation 'Takuba,' a task force mainly composed of European Special Operations Forces aimed at shoring up the French Operation Barkhane mission in the fight against jihadi groups.[95]

ISGS has sustained its violence in the Sahel. During a one-year period between May 2019 and May 2020, it undertook 18 attacks that left more than 400 soldiers dead in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger.[96] One factor that may in the future reduce its operational tempo is the deterioration in its relationship with al-Qa`ida groups under the umbrella of JNIM. Despite what for a period of time was an amicable live-and-let live relationship between ISGS and JNIM—often described as the "Sahelian exception" for the lack of violence between the groups—ISGS's recent ascendance has led it to challenge JNIM's hegemony.[97] Since the summer of 2019, there has been open conflict between the two groups in parts of the Sahel, demonstrated by 65 reported clashes between the two groups between July 2019 and August 2020, resulting in (by low estimates) at least 490 jihadis killed on both sides.[98] Thus, while ISGS has only grown stronger since the death of al-Baghdadi, it may become a victim of its own success in now having to fight a multi-front war under intense and sustained pressure from both counterterrorism forces as well as al-Qa`ida-aligned jihadis in the Sahel.

Somalia Province

While never one of the largest or most deadly African provinces of the Islamic State and paling in comparison in nearly all aspects to its local al-Qa`ida analogue al-Shabaab,[99] the Islamic State's Somalia province has been a consistent, low-level threat inside Somalia, even though, as will be discussed, there was a slight slowdown in its operational tempo from late 2019 to mid-2020.

The Islamic State's province in Somalia emerged in its pre-province form in October 2015.[100] In that month, Abdul Qadir Mumin, a British-born al-Shabaab ideologue[101] based in northern Somalia, pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi, effectively breaking away from his northern al-Shabaab unit and bringing approximately 20 al-Shabaab fighters stationed in the Puntland region of Somalia with him.[102] Roughly one year after the pledge, Mumin and his fighters overran the Puntland town of Qandala and occupied it for slightly less than two months between October and December 2016, prior to being dislodged by Somali and international forces.[103] Thereafter, the Islamic State in Somalia began primarily attacking police and military targets, first in Puntland, and then increasingly moving farther south into Mogadishu and Afgoyee. This invited a response from the United States, which began targeting the group with airstrikes in October 2017.[104] Islamic State-Somalia's violence reached the pinnacle of its operational tempo in 2018 with a total of 66 operations, according to data collected by FDD's Long War Journal.[105] Not coincidentally, from August 2018, after years of acknowledgment that stopped short of recognizing it as a province, Islamic State Central officially and consistently began referring to its fighters in Somalia as members of its official Islamic State *wilaya*.[106] Before al-Baghdadi's death, the Islamic State in Somalia had been tasked by Islamic State Central to serve as its oversight body of broader Islamic State activities in East Africa.[107]

Since al-Baghdadi's death, the Islamic State in Somalia has decreased its operational tempo slightly,[108] and though the group is not particularly deadly, it has remained a threat. Throughout 2020, the Islamic State in Somalia, also according to the Long War Journal, has launched no more than four attacks per month, though even many of these cannot be verified.[109] One likely reason for the decline is significant personnel losses during 2020. These include the January 2020 killing of an Islamic State-Somalia leader by Puntland Security Forces (PSF)[110] and other raids undertaken by a combination of either PSF or Somali intelligence agencies that captured Islamic State-Somalia members and its southern leader in March and April 2020, respectively.[111] A raid in May 2020 also captured various members of Islamic State-Somalia including Mumin's driver, members of its internal police service, as well as raids targeting the storehouses of its weapons.[112] Beyond formal counterterrorism pressure, the group has also been weakened by attacks by members of al-Qa`ida-affiliated al-Shabaab, with whom it has been clashing since its emergence in 2015.[113] In short, though the Islamic State in Somalia has decreased its operational tempo, the decline is too small to represent a change in trajectory caused by Islamic State Central's misfortunes and is most likely a function of increased targeting by local security forces and the antagonistic jihadi group al-Shabaab.[114]

Central Africa Province (ISCAP)

The Islamic State's newest official *wilaya*—both on the African continent and globally—is its "Central Africa Province" (ISCAP), composed of two separate, geographically distinct insurgencies—one in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo and one in northern Mozambique—that have nominally merged into one singular *wilaya*. Particularly unique is that amongst the group's African affiliates, the

o These occurred in Koutougou in Burkina Faso; In-Delimane and Tabonkort in Mali; and In-Ates (twice) and Chinagodrar in Niger. "Burkina : après la mort de 24 militaires dans une attaque, l'opposition demande la démission du gouvernement," Jeune Afrique, August 20, 2019.

first official use of the province's name in April 2019[115] did not take place until *after* the March 2019 fall of Baghouz.

The Origins of the Congolese Wing of ISCAP

The first of ISCAP's two wings is the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), an Islamist rebel group that originated in Uganda in the early 1990s. Following a failed rebellion in western Uganda in 1995, its members were forced to flee to eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, where they embedded themselves within local conflict dynamics as violence spiraled into two regional wars and enduring instability.[116] A 2014 military offensive by the Congolese military severely degraded the group[117] and forced its longtime leader, Jamil Mukulu, to flee to Tanzania, where he was later arrested and extradited back to Uganda.[118] His successor, Musa Baluku, rebuilt much of the group's strength in eastern DRC and embarked on a campaign of retaliatory massacres that killed almost 3,000 Congolese civilians between October 2014 and October 2019,[119] while pivoting the ADF's rhetoric and identity away from its focus on Uganda and toward that of the broader transnational jihadi movement.[120]

The Origins of the Mozambican Wing of ISCAP

The second of ISCAP's two wings derives from an ongoing insurgency in northern Mozambique, which emerged in October 2017 as a salafi splinter movement, which began a sustained insurgent campaign against the government after several years of escalating confrontations. Tensions between the radical youth movement—locally and colloquially referred to as "al-Shabaab"[p]—and government-backed clerics escalated as the sect demanded 'Islamic' governance and denounced the secular ruling FRELIMO party.[121] Following arrests of "Al Shabaab" members in Mocimboa da Praia at the behest of government-affiliated clerics, the group attacked police throughout the town on October 5, 2017.[122] While these initial attacks were largely unsuccessful, they began a steadily escalating rural insurgency, feeding off a sense of marginalization within Muslim communities along the coast that had developed from feelings of ethnic discrimination at the hands of FRELIMO against the largely Muslim Mwani and religiously mixed Macua of the coast in favor of the largely Christian Makonde of Cabo Delgado's interior.[123] This was compounded by dashed expectations of rapid economic development following the discovery of the third-largest gas reserves in Africa in 2009,[124] as residents were promised jobs and infrastructure but instead faced displacement from their coastal villages with very limited compensation.[125]

While there had been indications since at least July 2018 of ties developing between Islamic State Central and the ADF in the DRC,[q] the official announcement of the "Central Africa Province" in April 2019 was the first announcement of a new *wilaya* following the fall of Baghouz in March 2019, and was no doubt designed to send a message that the Islamic State could still "remain and expand" despite the loss of the territorial core that had been so crucial to its global image. The new province's violence was soon visible. An attack by the ADF wing was claimed by Islamic State Central's media apparatus on April 18, 2019,[126] while an attack by ISCAP's "Al Shabaab" wing in Mozambique was officially claimed on June 4, 2019.[127] Indeed, between the first attack claims in April 2019 and the end of the year, Islamic State media claimed 23 attacks in the DRC and 14 attacks in Mozambique under the Central Africa Province moniker.[128]

Divergent Trajectories Between the Two ISCAP Wings

In early November 2019, however—not long after al-Baghdadi's death—the trajectories of ISCAP's ADF and "Al Shabaab" branches began to diverge sharply. Even prior to the first official claim of an attack in the DRC, Congolese President Felix Tshisekedi visited Washington in April 2019 seeking assistance for fighting the ADF, framing it as a fight against the Islamic State, two and a half months after he had assumed office.[129] Following months of escalating rhetoric by the Congolese government, the Congolese military (FARDC) launched a large-scale offensive on October 30, 2019, driving the ADF from most of its main base areas in Beni territory within a month. The ADF responded with vicious reprisal attacks on civilians as it tried to divert the FARDC from the frontlines,[130r] and appears to have relocated most of its fighters to new areas in Beni and neighboring Irumu territories,[131] as well as reestablished recruitment and finance networks in Uganda. A brief lull in massacres perpetrated by the terrorists was followed by a rapid escalation beginning in March 2020 as the ADF attempted to clear civilians from its new areas of operation.[132] By mid-September 2020, more than 800 civilians had been killed in around 200 retaliatory ADF attacks in Beni and Ituri.[s] While individual ADF attacks remained for the most part relatively small-scale—occasionally killing dozens but on average resulting in five fatalities[t]—the extremely high fre-

p "Al Shabaab," meaning "The Youth" in Arabic, has been used colloquially to refer to jihadi militants along the Swahili coast, but does not necessarily denote connections to al-Shabaab in Somalia. In ASWJ's case, there is no evidence of ties between the groups, and ties would be extremely unlikely given ASWJ's allegiance to the Islamic State. It is important to note, however, that an official al-Qa`ida media outlet claimed an attack in Mozambique in May 2020, though there is no further evidence the group has a presence there. Caleb Weiss, "This is quite interesting. Al Qaeda's Al Thabat news agency is reporting an attack …," Twitter, May 22, 2020.

q An Islamic State-affiliated financier named Ahmed Zein was arrested in Nairobi in July 2018 for allegedly transferring more than $150,000 USD to Islamic State fighters in Syria, Libya, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Beth Nyaga; "Police arrest duo involved in terrorism facilitation for ISIS," Kenya Broadcasting Corporation, July 5, 2018. Al-Baghdadi passingly referred to "Central Africa" in a list of Islamic State provinces in an August 2018 speech. Wassim Nasr, "#RDC #El dans son discours, en appelant au combat et au jihad …," Twitter, April 19, 2019.

r ADF fighters killed 107 civilians from May 1 to June 3, 2020, north of Eringeti, where local civil society warns they have established new bases. "Ituri: Un Bastion ADF Installe au Village Kamambou," Infocongo, May 31, 2020.

s Congolese NGO Le Centre d'Etudes pour la Promotion de la Paix, la Démocratie et le Droit de l'Homme (Study Center for the Promotion of Peace, Democracy and Human Rights CEPADHO) maintains a record of attacks by the ADF in Beni and Ituri, and has recorded the killing of 888 civilians by the ADF since October 30, 2019. Barak Munyampfura Héritier, "RDC : 134 civils tués par les ADF en Ituri et au Nord-Kivu, le CEPADHO parle d'un mouvement terroriste," MNCTV Congo, September 12, 2020.

t Between May and August 2020, there were 90 attacks and raids against civilians and Congolese military personnel by small units of ADF combatants, which on average killed five civilians and/or soldiers per attack, according to the ADF attacks dataset maintained by Ryan O'Farrell.

quency of its attacks on Congolese civilians and military personnel has meant that although the FARDC has seized back territory, it has still struggled to contain ISCAP-ADF's violence.

For its part, the trajectory of ISCAP's "Al Shabaab" branch in northern Mozambique since the first attack claims in June 2019 has been far different, facing no such large-scale offensive by Mozambican security forces. While the group had been able to coordinate attacks by multiple units across long distances, unit sizes and objectives often remained small[u] until the beginning of 2020, when "Al Shabaab" began staging large-scale raids, notably on district capitals, in quick succession. In the first of these large scale raids on March 23, 2020, as many as 100 insurgents briefly seized parts of Mocimboa da Praia, the birthplace of the movement.[133] Two days later on March 25, 2020, "Al Shabaab" briefly took Quissanga, 120 kilometers south of Mocimboa da Praia.[134] On April 7, 2020, insurgents staged an even larger assault on Muidumbe district, 65 kilometers southwest of Mocimboa da Praia, seizing the eponymous district capital and five other towns before retreating.[135] On May 29, 2020, more than 90 fighters blocked most roads into Macomia, 100 kilometers southwest of Mocimboa da Praia, and seized the town before retreating from a counterattack by security forces.[136] Furthermore, "Al Shabaab" attempted public outreach in its raids on major urban centers: fighters infamous for indiscriminate attacks on civilians instead began to distribute food and money, and gave speeches denouncing the FRELIMO government for its purported abandonment of the poor and advocating sharia as an alternative to the secularism of the Mozambican state.[v]

Both wings of ISCAP have proven their resilience, deadliness, and capacity. By August 2020, ISCAP's ADF wing had not only relocated to new base areas and reestablished its support and recruitment networks,[w] but was again mounting attacks in the areas it was expelled from in the November 2019 government offensive.[137] The "Al Shabaab" wing in Mozambique has dramatically demonstrated its growing capabilities, and the Mozambican government and its allies have struggled to cope.[x] With Russian Wagner mercenaries withdrawing from the country after suffering unexpected casualties in ambushes by "Al Shabaab"[y] and South African mercenaries failing to reverse the tide of the insurgency despite their provision of attack helicopters in support of Mozambican security forces,[138] "Al Shabaab" launched another assault on Mocimboa da Praia in early August 2020. Entering the town on August 5, 2020, it managed to seize it entirely by August 11.[139] Still holding the town three months later, the seizure not only represents "Al Shabaab's" most significant action thus far, but the most notable territorial conquest of any Islamic State affiliate since the fall of Baghouz 16 months prior.

The fall of 2020 saw significant escalation by both the ADF in Congo and "Al Shabaab" in Mozambique. On October 14, Mozambican militants crossed the Rovuma River, which divides northern Mozambique from southern Tanzania, attacking the town of Kitaya. Killing more than a dozen, looting stores and pharmacies, they ambushed a military patrol sent to counter them, destroying a Chinese-made armored personnel carrier.[140] On October 19 in Congo, the ADF mounted a morning raid on the Kangbayi prison on the outskirts of Beni city,[141] attacking two military posts and freeing 1,333 prisoners, including 236 ADF members.[142] On October 31, Mozambican militants again crossed into Tanzania, attacking three towns near the border just days after the presidential election.[143] All three attacks were quickly claimed in Islamic State propaganda channels—within hours in the case of the Kangbayi prison break[144]—indicating deepening coordination in media output. In November 2020, "Al Shabaab" in Mozambique launched another coordinated assault on Muidumbe district, assaulting nine towns simultaneously,[145] displacing tens of thousands,[146] and beheading over 50 people on a soccer pitch, according to state media.[147]

It is important to recognize that despite reported attempts at consolidation, ISCAP does not represent a united horizontal structure between its two "wings." While ADF-affiliated Ugandans have been arrested in Mozambique[148] and Islamic State Central designated its Somali branch as a "command center" for both ISCAP affiliates,[149] tangible, material ties between the two groups that could affect either wings' trajectory are limited and speculative. Both the ADF in eastern Congo and "Al Shabaab" in northern Mozambique remain functionally separate organizations, largely insulated from the fortunes of each other just as they are both insulated from the fortunes of Islamic State Central. From what can be deduced from open-source information, both wings' vertical relations with Islamic State Central seemingly remain far more important than horizontal ties between them, and even then, Islamic State Central's severe setbacks in 2019 do not appear to have changed the trajectory of the Islamic State threat in Central Africa.

Having evaluated the state of the official, formal provinces of the Islamic State in Africa, this article now turns to another jihadi

u A 2018 report stated, "It is estimated that the movement now has between about 350 and 1,500 members who are organized in tens of small cells along the coast of Northern Mozambique." "Mozambique's own version of Boko Haram is tightening its deadly grip," Conversation, June 11, 2018.

v "'At a public meeting [following the April 7, 2020, seizure of Ntchinga], and speaking in the local language, kimwani, ["Al Shabaab" fighters] said [to local civilians]: 'We are occupying this village to show that the government of the day is unfair. It humiliates the poor to the advantage of bosses. Those who are detained are those of the lower class, so this is not fair. Like it or not, we are defending Islam. We want an Islamist government, not a government of unbelievers.'" Peter Fabricius, "'SA private military contractors' and Mozambican airforce conduct major air attacks on Islamist extremists," Daily Maverick, April 9, 2020.

w According to a U.N. report, "Four ex-combatants said that Baluku Abdurrahman, identified as part of the Ugandan ADF leadership, had returned to Uganda in early November 2019 to organize recruitment and establish a materiel supply network from there in coordination with Amigo. Between November 2019 and January 2020, two of those ex-combatants respectively brought 20 and 30 new recruits from Abdurrahman to the Democratic Republic of the Congo and had been paid $30 per recruit." "Letter dated 2 June 2020 from the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo addressed to the President of the Security Council," United Nations Security Council, June 2, 2020.

x "Analyst Emilia Columbo says that Mozambican security forces are not trained in counter-extremist operations and lack the discipline, equipment, and military intelligence to combat the insurgency. And without a more comprehensive approach to dealing with economic and social problems in northern Mozambique, she believes the insurgency will become an entrenched and long-term security problem." Tim Lister, "Jihadi Insurgency in Mozambique Grows in Sophistication and Reach," *CTC Sentinel* 13:10 (2020).

y Wagner mercenaries had deployed to Mozambique in September 2019, but faced mounting casualties by October. Geoffrey York, "Russian mercenaries regroup after setback in Mozambique," *Globe and Mail*, November 29, 2019.

group on the continent that has officially affiliated with the Islamic State Central, but which, to date, has not to date been granted "provincial" status.

"Jund al-Khilafah" in Tunisia

The Islamic State cadre in Tunisia has only ever existed as a formally recognized non-province affiliate of the Islamic State. Despite intermittent attacks by the members of the Tunisian Islamic State group, its visibility on the continent has been in decline, even before the fall of Baghouz and the death of al-Baghdadi, and those misfortunes for Islamic State Central have not therefore altered the trajectory of the group's fortunes in Tunisia.

In the year that followed the Tunisian 2010-2011 revolution, activists set out on a militant project by procuring weapons and establishing logistics infrastructure, laying the foundations of a protracted low-level insurgency in mountainous regions bordering Algeria[150] and a subsequent terror campaign in urban areas. Cooperation between Ansar al-Sharia (Tunisia) and AQIM resulted in the creation of the Uqba Bin Nafaa Brigade (or KUBN), which became AQIM's Tunisian branch.[151] Increasingly emboldened, violent, and challenging to the state, in 2013, the Islamist-led "Troika"-government ultimately outlawed Ansar al-Sharia[152] and cracked down on the movement, causing many members to go clandestine or become foreign fighters in countries including Iraq, Libya, and Syria.[153] Though the Ansar al-Sharia (Tunisia) movement was soon rendered quasi-defunct, some members remained within the al-Qa`ida orbit as part of KUBN, albeit underground, with a larger segment finding resonance in the Islamic State's message. The Ifriqiya lil-Ilam ("Africa Media") website, which was a Tunisian jihadi online media outlet, publicly announced support for the Islamic State in September 2014,[154] and the pro-Islamic State tendency that had emerged within the otherwise al-Qa`ida-aligned KUBN, eventually evolved into an Islamic State-affiliated offshoot, "Jund Al-Khilafah" (Tunisia) (JAK-T), meaning "Soldiers of the Caliphate."[155] Though recognized by Islamic State Central, JAK-T has yet to be elevated to provincial status.

In 2015, a series of high-profile terror attacks carried out by Islamic State operatives targeted tourist sites and security personnel: at the Bardo Museum in Tunis; at the tourist resort of Port El Kantaoui, near Sousse;[156] and a suicide bombing on a Presidential Guard bus in downtown Tunis,[157] all targeting Tunisia's vital tourism industry.[158] Across the border, in the Libyan town of Sabratha, Tunisian Islamic State fighters established an extraterritorial satellite. In Sabratha, they planned and staged the aforementioned 2015 high-profile attacks against tourist sites in Bardo and Sousse, and a 2016 raid in an attempt to seize the Tunisian border town of Ben Guerdane.[159] The multipronged raid on Ben Guerdane aimed at establishing an "emirate" spanning the Tunisia-Libya border. If the assault had succeeded, it would have represented Tunisian Islamic State militants' "Breaking the Borders" moment, replicating the accomplishment of their brethren on the border between Iraq and Syria back in June 2014.[z] The well-organized venture to stand up a *wilaya* ultimately failed due to the Tunisian security forces counter-attack and lack of local support.[160] [aa]

The years 2015-2016 would turn out to be the high-water mark for the Islamic State in Tunisia. Despite its early efforts to stand up a viable Islamic State *wilaya,* Tunisian counterterrorism efforts since 2015—with growing experience and improved counterinsurgency and counterterrorism capabilities and international support for capacity building, including training, equipment, military advisors, and ISR, especially from the United States[ab]—weakened the Islamic State network threatening Tunisia. This was evidenced by the rise in militant casualties and a downward trend in government forces casualties.[161] Nevertheless, Tunisian forces have not completely dislodged JAK-T and its al-Qa`ida counterpart KUBN. While there have been no large-scale Islamic State attacks in Tunisia since the aforementioned 2015-2016 events, the group has diversified its *modi operandi*. Since 2018, its attacks have included an arson attack on a mausoleum,[162] the blowing up of a gas pipeline,[163] a motorbike-borne raid,[164] assassination,[165] and bank robberies,[166] in addition to armed engagements and the use of IEDs.

Despite its own decline, Islamic State Central has taken note of its fighters' presence in Tunisia: militants from JAK-T have been featured in Islamic State Central's media campaign, including a first-ever photo report showing the daily lives of Tunisian Islamic State militants[167] and a beheading video by the semi-official al-Furat Media Foundation.[168] This publicizing was indicative of Islam-

z "Breaking the borders" refers to the symbolic moment when Islamic State commanders Abu Muhammad al-Adnani and Umar al-Shishani, in the month of Ramadan 2014, bulldozed the sand wall in Tell Safouk that marked the border between Iraq and Syria. For more details, see Aaron Y. Zelin, *Your Sons Are at Your Service: Tunisia's Missionaries of Jihad* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), pp. 204-205, 233-234; "Al-I'tisam Media presents a new video message from the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham: 'Breaking Of the Border,'" Jihadology, June 29, 2014; "New video message from The Islamic State: 'One Nation – Wilayat al-Furat,'" Jihadology, June 2, 2017.

aa Simultaneously, a significant logistics network had been established by Islamic State militants as early as 2014 in southeastern Tunisia, littered with arms caches including advanced and heavy weapons, large amounts of explosives, and ammunition. The militants had reportedly designated an organizational structure to administrate the area. " [Manitah, emir of the organization, loud confessions by the terrorist elements in Ben Guerdane]," Tuniscope, March 10, 2016; Akher Khabar, printed issue 189, April 19, 2016.

ab Tunisia's primary strategic partner in the domain of counterterrorism is the United States, which has sought to sustain Tunisia's shaky democratic transition by bolstering Tunisia's military through a multifaceted partnership. This has had a profound impact on Tunisian counterterrorism doctrine, including the development of Tunisia's drone program, the extensive use of close air support, and the equipment utilized by Tunisian special forces.

A more controversial aspect of this relationship is the presence of "American boots on the ground." On August 15, 2018, United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), in response to a Freedom of Information Act request by the online news publication Task & Purpose, confirmed that two members of Marine Special Operations Command received valor awards for their heroism during a gun battle with al-Qa`ida militants at an undisclosed location in Northern Africa. Paul Szoldra, "Exclusive: 2 Marines Received Valor Awards For Secret Gunfight Against Al Qaeda In North Africa," Task & Purpose, August 15, 2018. Further research and analysis by author Héni Nsaibia of the Task & Purpose report found that the fierce battle took place at Mount Semmama, in Kasserine, Tunisia, and represented the first documented direct U.S. military engagement and recorded casualty in Tunisia since World War II. Héni Nsaibia, "America Is Quietly Expanding Its War in Tunisia," *National Interest*, September 18, 2018.

ic State Central's broader media shift since the fall of Baghouz in March 2019 to highlight the activities of some of its affiliates on the African continent to distract from its territorial defeat in Syria.

Conveniently for Islamic State Central, a month prior to the fall of Baghouz, Islamic State militants in Tunisia had stepped up their activities, manifested by a series of IED attacks,[169] and beheadings.[170] The focal point for these attacks, around Mount Orbata in Tunisia's southern Gafsa Governorate, a region that in recent years only had witnessed sporadic militant activities, suggested that Tunisian Islamic State militants were attempting to to either expand in or relocate their operations to Tunisia's western mountains. The spate of attacks, albeit sporadic, continued throughout 2019 and 2020. In June 2019, there was a twin-suicide bombing in Tunis targeting security forces,[171] another suicide bombing during a security operation took place in July 2019, also in the capital.[172] Most notably, in March 2020, two suicide bombers targeted a police patrol by blowing up their explosives-laden motorcycle in Berges du Lac, near the U.S. embassy in Tunis.[173] In addition, assailants seemingly inspired by the Islamic State have conducted stabbing attacks targeting security force members,[174] with one such stabbing attack that occurred in July 2020 in Sousse claimed by the Islamic State while the others were attributed either to Islamic State-linked cells or radical Islamists.[175]

Despite these recurring attacks, Tunisian state forces have over the years accumulated significant experience and developed capabilities and a more comprehensive approach to degrade the Islamic State network and its al-Qa`ida counterpart.[176] Nevertheless, underwritten by the world's highest proportion of foreign fighters per capita, a large domestic supporter base, and an overcrowded prison system providing a radical breeding ground, these phenomena, in addition to the diverse and dynamic network the Islamic State has developed, will likely serve to replenish militant ranks with the potential to continue to fragilize Tunisia's security.[177] In that vein, Tunisia's "Jund al-Khilafah" remains a moderate threat.

Assessing the Overall State of the Islamic State in Africa

What then has been the overall trajectory of the Islamic State's various official provinces and non-province affiliate groups in Africa from late 2019 to late 2020? In general, the Islamic State's African provinces and non-province affiliates have had heterogeneous fortunes since October 2019, though none appears to have been significantly impacted by the decline-cementing *annus horribilis* that Islamic State Central experienced in 2019. Some Islamic State provinces in Africa remain strong. Notably, ISWAP's Lake Chad wing sustained its attack tempo, while in Islamic State *wilayat* in Libya, Sinai, and Somalia and the Islamic State non-province affiliate in Tunisia, patterns of violence have remained generally intact since the setbacks for Islamic State Central in 2019; the groups remain active but contained. Elsewhere, both the Mozambican and Congolese wings of ISCAP have increased the tempo of their attacks—with the Mozambican wing's August 2020 capture of a major port town constituting the Islamic State's most significant military victory since the loss of its territorial caliphate—while ISWAP's relatively newly-incorporated ISGS wing has increased its lethality and frequency of its attacks. For its part, the Islamic State's Algerian province remains essentially defunct, as had been the case for years. In sum then, Islamic State Central's loss of its last territorial holding and its leader in 2019 appears to have had little negative effect on the vitality of its African branches, none of which have seen appreciable declines in activity, and a few of which have actually seen increased activity.

Just what explains this phenomenon? In the main—and as the authors argue in their forthcoming book, *The Islamic State in Africa: Emergence, Evolution, and Future of the Next Jihadist Battlefront*—the Islamic State's African provinces and non-province affiliate groups, while showing evidence of interaction with it and occasional assistance from it, developed mostly autonomously from the Islamic State Central. Thus, upon the latter's substantial losses in 2019—and Islamic State Core's broader, more gradual decline in the years prior—the affiliates' own trajectories were little impacted. Nevertheless, the authors seek to emphasize that despite the limited known ties between the Islamic State Central and its African affiliates, these groups' status as affiliates has nevertheless had implications for their evolution.

For one, despite the fact that Islamic State Central was rarely profoundly involved in its African provinces' affairs, in several instances, affiliates received assistance and direction from Islamic State Central. For instance, in relation to Libya in 2014, Islamic State Central commanders directed Libyans in Iraq and Syria to return home,[178] sent envoys to Libya,[179] and publicized its Libyan provinces' actions (including its atrocities) widely via its media outlets.[180] In Somalia, Puntland security officials report that Islamic State Central has provided members of its branch there with weapons, funding, uniforms, and trainers.[181] Islamic State Central is believed to have helped stand up then-"Boko Haram's" media wing,[182] *al-'Urwah al-Wuthqa* (or the "Indissoluble Link"[ac]) in 2015; approved the ISWAP leadership transition from Shekau to al-Barnawi in 2016;[183] communicated directly with members of ISWAP in 2018;[184] and served to fold ISGS into ISWAP (at least on paper) in 2019.[185] When it comes to advising ISWAP on how it should interact with others in its areas of operation, a report from the International Crisis Group suggests that Islamic State Central has worked to push for reconciliation between ISWAP and Shekau's JAS,[186] while according to some analysts Islamic State Central has seemingly encouraged the ISGS wing of ISWAP into conflict with local al-Qa`ida groups.[187]

Islamic State Central's impact on its affiliates is felt in other ways. As concerns media, it not only requires the centralization of media releases by its African media production[188] and dissemination,[189] but its influence has been seen in the actual production of media of African Islamic State affiliates, to include significantly improved production values compared to pre-Islamic State pledge days, the inclusion of new iconography,[190] and the inclusion of subtitled translations into other regional languages.[ad] Furthermore, Islamic State Central makes decisions around if and when insurgent groups do and do not attain provincial status at all (for example, it excluded Tunisia from *wilaya* status[ae] and delayed significantly the

ac A noted Islamic scholar, Yusuf Ali, called it "the most trusted handhold." Another calls it the "firmest handle," "the most trustworthy hand-hold," "the most firm handhold." Author communication, Muhammad al-`Ubaydi, December 2019.

ad Boko Haram began to include subtitles in early 2015, around the same time it began to interact with the Islamic State. "Is Islamic State Shaping Boko Haram Media?" BBC, March 4, 2015.

ae As of publication of this article in November 2020, Islamic State Central has yet to elevate its Tunisian fighters to provincial status.

rise of the provincial status of Somalia[af]); determining the structures of its provinces (by creating mergers of varying groups as it has done in Libya,[ag] with regard to ISWAP, and with regard to ISCAP); and determining patterns of authority of its provinces (for instance, placing support networks in East Africa under the authority of its Somali affiliate[191]). In sum, these interactions between the central node and the affiliates, sparse though they may be, had a meaningful impact, which should not be overlooked.

Second, even though most Islamic State provinces in Africa have not shown evidence of profound direct material support from Islamic State Central, their mere affiliation with the group—serving as Islamic State-branded entities—has tangible impacts on the way in which these groups 'move about in the world.' As an identity marker (however potentially hollow in its practical connective forms), to be an "Islamic State" province in Africa informs patterns of groups' local fighter recruitment;[ah] foreign fighter recruitment;[ai] training;[aj] fundraising;[192] tactics;[ak] and attempts at governance.[193] In addition to these impacts on the internal composition and tactics of the groups, the Islamic State brand impacts patterns of local ethnic relations;[194] international relations;[195] counterterrorism pressure against the groups,[196] and potential rivalries and alliances with other jihadi groups in the area of operation.[197] While holding onto the Islamic State brand has brought few known material benefits from Islamic State Central itself, as a marker of identity, it has had an impact on how groups have evolved after fusing their identity with the Islamic State, as is further discussed in the authors' forthcoming book.

Third, being an Islamic State province or non-province affiliate in Africa means that these entities are part of a wider network of *other* African provinces and non-province affiliates, which can—and have—offered assistance in various forms to one another, especially after Islamic State Central's decline. For instance, as early as May 2016, U.S. officials warned that ISWAP personnel under Shekau had journeyed to Libya to learn skills and receive logistical and material from Islamic State members there.[198] Likewise, in January 2020, U.N. member states told U.N. monitors that the Islamic State's Somalia province had been "designated the command center" for establishing a "triad" organization in eastern, central, and southern Africa, facilitating financial transfers and "consolidating decision-making and operational command centres."[199]

Fourth, these groups' existence as official Islamic State entities has the potential to show other individual militants and militant groups the benefits (and pitfalls) of affiliation with the Islamic State. Since its global emergence, a universe of unofficial Islamic State individual sympathizers and unofficial 'cells' around the continent have been inspired to undertake attacks in the name of the Islamic State, though not directed by it. Notable Islamic State-inspired attacks and plots over the past five years on the continent include two Islamic State-inspired attacks in Kenya in 2016, an Islamic State-inspired attack in Morocco in 2018,[200] and a plot in South Africa in 2016,[201] while attempts by the Islamic State to build some level of popularity in Ethiopia through Amharic-language propaganda[202] were followed by arrests of Islamic State sympathizers who had entered the country from Somalia.[203]

Notwithstanding the above points, the authors caution vigorously against the notion that African Islamic State affiliates should be understood *exclusively*, or even *primarily*, through the lens of their affiliations with Islamic State Central. Indeed, as the authors further explore and emphasize in their upcoming book, these violent groups—despite their sparse but still meaningful connections with Islamic State Central—are all primarily influenced by their local environments: all have parochial, specific, non-generalizable goals and ideologies, all of which require actors seeking to combat their violence to generate group-specific strategies that do not simply look at their Islamic State affiliation as their only meaningful attribute. Nor, as Barak Mendelsohn has cautioned, do the authors suggest that simply because of their affiliation as entities of the Islamic State, that they are necessarily more capable or dangerous than non-affiliated entities.[204]

In sum, precisely because the decline of the Islamic State Central in 2019 has had little impact on each of these African entities' individual operational trajectories, their abilities to perpetrate violence against the citizens and states in which they operate—ranging in severity depending on location—appears likely to remain unabated for the time being. While not existentially threatening to the states in which they exist, nor a profound threat to the United States, its allies, and the international community more broadly, the Islamic State's African provinces' threats relate to their proven capabilities to destabilize the communities in which they exist, exacerbating the physical and economic insecurity of citizens and posing new, costly, and often insurmountable challenges to partner governments fighting them. To the extent that the Islamic State's African provinces continue to present these enduring challenges, they are now, more than ever, left to do so of their own devices. CTC

af Despite evidence of interaction between Islamic State Somalia and Islamic State Central since 2015, the elevation to Islamic State province only occurred three years later.

ag Beginning in December 2018, Islamic State Central began referring to simply one "Wilayah Libya." Al-Naba #147, released December 13, 2018.

ah For instance, as the Islamic State's global brand began to rise, the incipient Islamic State in Libya was able to attract members away from Ansar al-Sharia in Libya; in Algeria, members defected from AQIM; in Egypt, members defected from ABM; in Tunisia, members defected from KUBN, and in Somalia, members defected from al-Shabaab.

ai In Libya, the emergence of the Islamic State coincided with an influx of foreign fighters from around Africa and beyond. See Aaron Zelin, "The Others: Foreign Fighters in Libya," *Washington Institute Policy Notes 45*, January 2018.

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